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SUBJECT: American Climbers Fired Upon Near Tibetan Border

1. (SBU) Summary. Two men wearing what appeared to be military uniforms and carrying automatic weapons fired a series of five shots at American climbers David Morton and Jeff Lamoureux in the Upper Solu Khumbu region near Nepal's border with Tibet, Morton reported to Post via e-mail. The incident occurred as the Americans were acclimatizing in preparation for attempts to record first summits of Nepal's newly opened peak Nanpai Gosum. One of the assailants reportedly identified himself as "Chinese military". While neither American was injured, their latest e-mail communication states they have abandoned their summit plans and are being accompanied by Nepali police officers to retrieve equipment and personal effects they abandoned during the attack at their base camp. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On October 24, the Consular Section received a telefax from Seattle-based Alpine Ascents International attaching an e-mail addressed to the Embassy from David Morton which described the shooting incident. [Note: Writing from Namche Bazaar, the central trading village in the Mount Everest region of Nepal, Morton had tried to send the message directly to Post, but stated it "bounced back"]. Morton, a mountain guide, and his climbing partner Jeffrey Lamoureux had filed AmCit registrations with the Embassy before embarking on an attempt to record first-ascents of Nanpai Gosum, a 24,000 ft. peak newly opened for climbing by the Nepali Government last December. Nanpai Gosum's three summits lie west of Mount Everest, adjacent to the 8,000M Cho Oyo Peak only a few kilometers from the Nepal-Tibet border.

3. (SBU) Morton's initial e-mail reporting the shooting states that on September 16, as part of the altitude acclimatization process in preparation for a summit bid, he and Lamoureux left their base camp headed "up towards" Nangpa La Pass, a nearly 19,000 ft. pass on the Nepal/Tibetan Chinese border. [Note: Nangpa La is both a trade route and a crossing point for Tibetan refugees attempting to gain entry into Nepal and/or India.] On the way to the pass, a man armed with an automatic weapon approached them. The man appeared to be of Han Chinese ethnicity, showed them what he claimed was his Chinese military uniform under his black jacket and said he was a member of the Chinese military.

4. (SBU) The man, described by Morton as "extremely nervous," asked where Morton and Lamoureux were coming from, if there were others behind them, where their base camp was located, etc. There is no indication that he asked the climbers' nationalities or for money. During a "very uncomfortable" encounter Morton and Lamoureux gave him food and water. He spoke very little English and when Morton attempted to communicate in Nepali, he indicated that he didn't speak that language. After taking the food, the man headed down the trail and Morton and Lamoureux continued upward. However, 20 minutes later, they spotted the man watching them from above, seated on a glacial moraine.

5. (SBU) After continuing up for another hour, they spotted another man, wearing the same type of ski hat as the first man they encountered, who ducked behind a rock 200 yards up the trail from them. Apprehending danger, they decided to go down. On the descent, they had another "awkward" encounter with the first interlocutor, to whom they again gave food and water. Ten minutes after he abruptly said "bye," they heard the first shot.

6. (SBU) At first Morton attempted to dismiss the shot, thinking the men were simply "messing around or something." However, two or three minutes after the first shot, Mr. Morton relates "there was a shot which came at us and just missed us - we heard the bullet go right past our ears." The two Americans

began running, ditched their packs so they could move faster and stopped on occasion behind rocks to catch their breaths "because it was so difficult (16,000 ft.)." The two men continued their pursuit and fired a total of five shots during the chase. Morton hid his money under a rock, and the two Americans eventually found a hiding place amidst the rocks where they remained for three or four hours.

17. (SBU) When they felt safe enough to move Morton and Lamoureux returned to their base camp and, after discussing what had occurred with their Nepali cook and their porter, decided to descend down toward Namche Bazaar as soon as it got dark. They left base camp at 8 p.m. and reached Thame at 5 a.m., arriving safely in Namche Bazaar the next day.

18. (SBU) ConOff spoke with the Americans' local trekking agent who had received a second e-mail from Morton stating he and Lamoureux had met with the military and police in Namche Bazaar and would be returning to collect their supplies at base camp in the company of two Nepali police officers. Embassy has sent an e-mail to Morton advising of our concern and asking him to contact Consul directly upon his return to Namche Bazaar. PolOff advised the MFA concerning the shootings within Nepal's borders during a meeting on September 24. The MFA was unaware of the incident.

19. (SBU) Comment: Morton's e-mail indicates his uncertainty about the identity of the armed men who fired upon him and Lamoureux. "[A]t first we thought perhaps Maoists but this guy was clearly Chinese and claimed to not speak Nepali," Morton wrote, adding: "[O]ur sirdhar and his Sherpa helper from that valley think that they were Chinese police." He also speculated that they could be Chinese bandits. Maoist insurgents are not typically found at such elevations (16,000 ft.). In the incidents where trekkers have reported encountering purported Maoists, the Maoists ususally ask for money. From the details of the terrain given in Morton's report, it seems clear that, whatever the identity of the gunmen, the incident occurred on the Nepal side of Nangpa La Pass.

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